

Memorandum

To: State Directors
From: Duane L. Shroufe, Chair, IAFWA Teaming with Wildlife Committee
Subject: Recommendations Concerning Public Participation in Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategies (Plans)
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Contacts: Sara Vickerman, Defenders of Wildlife, (503) 697-3222,
svickerman@defenders.org

Brian Stenquist, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, (651) 297-4889, brian.stenquist@dnr.state.mn.us

John F. Organ, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Federal Aid, NE Office,
(413) 253-8501; john_organ@fws.gov

The Need: One of the elements in the federal legislation providing wildlife diversity funds (e.g. State Wildlife Grants) addresses the need for public involvement in development of comprehensive wildlife conservation strategies (plans). This memo offers suggestions for states to consider relative to the purpose, nature, and extent of such involvement. The TWW Committee's SWG Work Group developed these suggestions, with assistance from recognized experts in the field.

The suggestions to follow are based on several assumptions. There are severe time constraints for the process, which limits the nature and extent of outreach opportunities. For many lay audiences, a conservation strategy (plan) will not be especially exciting. Many organizations and agencies are already engaged in conservation activities that need to be addressed and integrated into the state strategy. Other stakeholders may be skeptical of the planning effort, and could undermine its effectiveness if they believe their interests are threatened.

Ultimately, the purpose of involving the public in the planning process is to produce a collective set of conservation priorities for the state that will serve as a blueprint for strategic investments and activities that are reflective of public interest regarding conservation. The plans should help integrate and facilitate ongoing activities, and add value to projects already underway by providing a broader context and clearer definition of different roles and responsibilities.

Selecting the most appropriate techniques. To achieve this goal, it will be necessary to employ different techniques to meet different objectives with a variety of audiences. The techniques will vary depending on resources and local needs.

1. **Building partnerships** is an essential component of the planning process. Involving agencies, organizations and businesses with an interest in, and capacity to conserve wildlife and habitat, will improve the quality of the plan and increase the level of commitment to and ownership of the implementation. An effective partnership program

will help energize supporters and focus their energies on high priority conservation projects.

2. **Identifying, understanding, and engaging opponents** is another essential element. A potential exists for certain interest groups to react negatively to the idea of a conservation plan, or to attempt to undermine the strategies, funding, or policies needed for implementation. Involving these groups from the beginning may help allay their fears. Properly engaged, potential foes can become allies, especially if they see the plan as an opportunity to address some of their concerns. At a minimum, it will be important for them not to “veto” the planning effort.
3. **Informing the public** about the process and providing opportunities for them to share ideas and get involved may serve as an effective strategy to identify and recruit new constituencies for conservation actions. State statutes may require public meeting notification, especially if formal rulemaking or other decisions are being made.

Each planning effort must include an effective public involvement process tailored to its own unique circumstances. When designing public involvement, consider the following:

- Are conservation partnerships with agencies and organizations already in place, or must they be built?
- With whom do you want to build or strengthen a partnership?
- Whose potential opposition do you need to understand?
- What does the public need to be informed about for the plan to be successful?
- What capacity exists in the agency to facilitate a public involvement process?
- Have there been good or bad experiences in the past that can serve to guide this process?
- Are there statutory requirements or guidelines that must be followed?
- Who is available to manage the public involvement?
- Is the staff experienced and well-trained in managing and facilitating these processes?
- Can professional facilitation be provided?
- Does the agency and its partners have the staff ingredients for success or failure?

Start with specific objectives (begin with the end in mind). This is a critical concept in designing an effective, efficient, and successful public involvement process. Project managers should begin designing the process of public involvement with a specific set of objectives in mind rather than beginning with a specific set of techniques. Unfortunately, project managers often begin selecting involvement techniques (e.g., public meetings, steering committees) before they have developed objectives for public involvement based on project needs. Different techniques work best for different objectives. For example, an open house works well for the objective of “seeing the project through the public’s eyes,” but does not work well for the objective of “developing agreement between conflicting members of the public.”

Also, public involvement objectives for a particular project change over time. For example, in the beginning, there may be a need to (a) scope public perceptions about the project concept, (b) develop communication strategies for maintaining public contact, and (c) inform potentially

affected interests about the project. In the middle of the project, it may be important to understand their values, opinions, and perspectives on problems and possible solutions. At the end, it may be important to develop agreements between conflicting interest groups, so the plan can be successful. Each objective may require different techniques.

The Institute for Participatory Management and Planning, founded by Hans and Annemarie Bleiker, has developed an approach for helping project managers identify their specific public involvement objectives and obtaining informed consent from affected interests. The Institute has also developed a framework that helps managers select effective techniques based on project objectives. This approach has proven extremely useful in many fish and wildlife projects. The Institute offers training sessions around the country in using their Systematic Development of Informed Consent methodology. Their contact information is www.ipmp-bleiker.com, ipmp@aol.com, or (831) 373-4292.

The International Association for Public Participation (www.iap2.org) offers a public participation spectrum (inform-consult-involve-collaborate-empower) and a toolbox to help you select appropriate techniques. The Wildlife Society (<http://www.wildlife.org/>) also offers a stakeholder engagement spectrum (authoritative-passive-receptive-inquisitive-transactional-co-managerial) to help agencies select the amount of control the agency and other stakeholders will have in the process.

Addressing the expectations of the public. If the comprehensive wildlife conservation strategy is intended to satisfy the expectations of the public at large, it will be necessary to understand what they are. An exclusive focus on stakeholders may reduce controversy while failing to meet the long-term needs of the resource and satisfy the general population. Ideally, agencies would undertake a thorough and representative analysis of the preferences of, and impacts to various publics. A broad array of techniques may be useful depending on the situation, including panels, mail or phone surveys (e-mail surveys can also be used but are of questionable value due to inherent bias – computer access), existing data, etc. The Human Dimensions Unit at Colorado State University can provide assistance to states in sampling public opinions relevant to the plans (contact manfredo@cnr.colostate.edu). The Human Dimensions Research programs in the Department of Natural Resources at Cornell University and in the Illinois Natural History Survey can also provide assistance in this respect, and have experience in designing and evaluating the public involvement process. Contact Tom Brown at Cornell University (tlb4@cornell.edu) or the web site www.dnr.cornell.edu/hdru, or Craig Miller at the Illinois Natural History Survey (craigm@inhs.uiuc.edu, www.inhs.uiuc.edu/cwe.hd/; 217.333.7485).

Engaging resource users in wildlife conservation planning. Some of the most ecologically important land in the United States is in private ownership. A successful conservation strategy with a high potential for implementation is unlikely to materialize in the face of strenuous opposition from the landowner community. The best way to ensure their support (or at least to minimize active opposition) is to engage them in the process early, and provide access to the conservation strategy as it evolves. Summarized below are some lessons learned through experiences in conservation planning.

Benefits of a conservation plan for landowners and businesses

1. There are real potential benefits to people in the agriculture and forestry sectors who pay attention to environmental quality and wildlife habitat needs. These benefits include:
 - a. Improved relationships with consumers, regulators, and other publics for being responsible environmental stewards.
 - b. Potential for certification of food and forest products as sustainable or environmentally-friendly, which provides marketing advantages and could result in increased market share or higher prices.
 - c. Potential for income from incentive programs designed to protect and restore habitat.
 - d. Fewer listings of endangered species, thereby reducing exposure to regulation and litigation.
 - e. Improved certainty about the future to facilitate better investment decisions.
 - f. Potential revenue from wildlife-oriented recreation on private lands.
 - g. Intrinsic benefits for families, neighbors, and communities.
 - h. Reduced need for chemical inputs such as pesticides, when converting to a more natural system, thus resulting in reduced health risks and lower costs.
2. There are also benefits to businesses, home builders, land developers, local governments, and others with a primary focus on development.
 - a. A conservation plan can help steer development away from sensitive areas and toward more appropriate sites.
 - b. Knowing in advance what areas to avoid saves time, money, and controversy.
 - c. A conservation plan should help reduce species listings that disrupt development plans.
 - d. A network of habitat lands will improve quality of life in communities, help attract new businesses, and increase property values overall.
 - e. Strategically planning for undeveloped areas can reduce costs of infrastructure associated with sprawl.
 - f. There are public relations benefits for companies who actively support conservation. A plan will help focus philanthropic investments.
 - g. Natural lands provide ecological services that help communities save money on engineered solutions to water quality and other environmental problems.

Addressing common concerns. Anticipate potential controversies and defuse potential triggers by framing the planning process in terms that reduce the risks of public misunderstanding or intentional misrepresentation of the plan's purposes. Link the plan's purposes to established community values (depending on the state, these may range from hunting and recreation to economic development or quality of life). Acknowledge the value of existing conservation efforts and give special recognition to the importance of voluntary and cooperative private efforts. Emphasize the strategic nature of the plan (improving efficiency and effectiveness of public and private investments in wildlife conservation) and its value as an alternative to traditional regulatory approaches. Provide a clear description up-front of the planning process and its products, and how the resulting plan will be used.

Landowners and business interests want credit for having contributed to conservation in the past. Many landowners have intense knowledge of and concern for birds, fish, deer and other animals on their property. They believe that their management has been positive for these creatures. Finding a way to reward them for their contributions will help reduce animosity and may encourage support for additional measures.

Some landowners are especially concerned about the government “taking” their land or reducing its value through restrictive regulations. Language in the plan that assures landowners that they will be fairly treated, compensated, and fully involved in any decisions affecting their land will be helpful. Resistance to new regulations and aggressive acquisition programs can be intense, especially in rural areas.

Many landowners and businesses have had positive experiences with incentive programs, and tend to look more favorably on conservation tools that resemble carrots rather than sticks. A commonly held view is that where private lands have extraordinary public values, it is appropriate for the public to help finance the conservation through landowner assistance programs. These investments, from agencies and private sources, can have a positive impact on local economies.

Some landowner groups express the view that no land currently in agricultural production should be “lost,” even to conservation. This view is driven in part by an ideological perspective that values actively managed land more than wild, natural landscapes. It is also related to a concern that a decline in agricultural production in a community will threaten the viability of the local economy, resulting in closure of local businesses, schools, medical facilities. Although this issue is difficult to address without a detailed economic analysis in each community, it may help to point out that conservation lands are often actively managed, using agricultural tools and techniques. Managing land for agricultural production and wildlife simultaneously is possible, given careful planning and management. Incentive programs may bring financial resources to a community. An outstanding natural area with rich fish and wildlife resources can attract tourists, thereby diversifying and strengthening a local economy. (For information and examples on how natural areas with healthy wildlife populations can help rejuvenate local economies, visit Ted Eubanks’ Fermata website at www.fermatainc.com.)

Many landowner groups and public land managers bristle at the idea of creating “conservation reserves.” They view reserves as locking up land, excluding people, and generally wasting important resources. It is important to stress in the plan that not all conservation lands will be locked up, and that many human uses are compatible with wildlife conservation.

Local government concerns. Local governments may be concerned that a state conservation plan will take away local authority for land use decisions. By the same token, local governments who are interested in improving the quality of life, protecting ecological values, and creating an economic environment with greater certainty may be among the best allies when the time comes to implement the plan. They may be able to provide matching funds for conservation projects and political support for policy changes. Engage them in the process early and keep them informed.

Hot-button words and concepts. Terms like *reserve*, *preserve*, and *protect* may provoke adverse reactions from people who fear that actions to conserve wildlife will restrict what they can do with their land. Terms like *conserve*, *conservation*, *stewardship*, and *management* are more precise, and descriptive of the strategies likely to be proposed. Lands identified for conservation may be called *conservation opportunity areas*, suggesting flexibility and landowner choice.

Partnerships and *cooperation* generally have positive connotations, whereas *collaboration* sometimes evokes negative feelings.

Some interest groups find the word *plan* offensive, suggesting a decision to be made by government and imposed on them. More accurate terms may be *vision* or *strategy*, suggesting a general direction in which the specifics are negotiable.

Assessment of changes in habitat from historical conditions is typically an important part of the planning process, but some interests may leap to the conclusion that the goal is to restore landscapes to historical conditions. Planners should emphasize that historic conditions are used as a reference point, and to provide context for the current status of wildlife and habitat. Restoring landscapes to pre-settlement conditions may be neither practical nor desirable. A clear explanation of *restoration* is important.

It should be noted that, according to the technique proposed by the Bleikers (Systematic Development of Informed Consent), language should be blunt, even provocative, so opponents don't get the idea that the agency is appearing to sneak something by them. In any case, it is important to be honest with stakeholders about long-term implications of the strategy.

Potential techniques for engaging stakeholders in the process. Although there are many ways to engage stakeholders in a conservation planning process, one common and potentially effective technique is to establish an advisory committee. If a committee is formed, it should have a clear purpose, balanced representation and members who have demonstrated a capacity and willingness to understand different points of view. The members should understand exactly what their role is (to advise, not make the final decisions). An alternative model is to select a balanced group of advisors, who are called upon when needed, but do not necessarily meet as a group. Effective citizen participation is often low-key and informal because more formal, legalistic processes can inhibit effective communication.

An important point to keep in mind is that the most involved people may not be indicative of the public at large. Even in organizations, as in agencies, the outspoken people may be "opinion leaders" and not reflect the current feelings, etc. of the organization as a whole. Including such people is essential to success, but their viewpoints should be corroborated before being used to reflect the broader position.

It will not be possible to reach consensus on every plan element within the limited time available for the process. The most important outcome will be for planners to understand different perspectives, resolve some controversial issues, and set others aside for later. Building relationships and bringing diverse constituencies together for an extended period is a good

investment in streamlining future decisions. Communication will be easier without the suspicion and mistrust that sometimes exists.

Minor resistance may result in project modifications, but should not stop the process. If stakeholders understand that something will happen with or without their blessings, they may be more likely to engage constructively and allow a process to move forward. Make every effort to reward those who participate in good faith with continued access to decision-making.

Once the conservation plan is complete, ask advisors and partners to help present it to their constituent groups at conferences, workshops, meetings and through newsletters. Legislators can be approached by partners whose members are constituents.

Whether an outreach strategy is effective or not may depend largely on the personality and diplomatic skills of the project leader. It is critical to select a person who is politically savvy, responsive, a good communicator, trustworthy, and knowledgeable without being arrogant. It is also important for the project manager to be honest and forthcoming with information, and to share the responsibility with other groups and agencies for developing and implementing the plan. Any attempts to withhold information or to tightly control the process may undermine agency credibility and trust.

Assistance from the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies. To assist states with public involvement in conservation planning, IAFWA and its TWW Committee State Wildlife Grants Work Group will provide the following:

1. A list of resources addressing effective public participation strategies for conservation planning.
2. Contact information for consultants and facilitators with expertise in building informed consent and partnerships.
3. Information on workshops specifically designed to assist states in managing citizen participation in conservation planning.
4. Several case studies illustrating successes and failures with public involvement in conservation planning.